

Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay focused on domestic priorities in 2014, including employment, the development of hydropower, and democratic consolidation. Tobgay has made strides in his attempt to make the prime minister's office more open and accessible to the public, including using social media and supporting landmark legislation—passed in February—that aims to strengthen government transparency.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 29 / 40 (+1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 10 / 12

King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck formally succeeded his father in 2008, though he had been in power since the outgoing king's abdication in 2006. The monarch is head of state, can appoint some members of the Supreme Court and the heads of national commissions, and retains influence over ministerial positions. The monarchy remains highly popular with the public.

The constitution provides for a bicameral Parliament, with a 25-seat upper house, the nonpartisan National Council, and a 47-seat lower house, the National Assembly. Members of both bodies serve five-year terms. The king appoints five members of the National Council, and the remaining 20 are popularly elected; the lower house is entirely elected, and the head of the majority party is nominated by the king to serve as prime minister. The logistics of voting and vote counting remain heavily dependent on expertise and technology from India.

In the 2013 parliamentary elections, the opposition People's Democratic Party won 32 seats. The Druk Peace and Prosperity Party, which had dominated the first national elections in 2008, won the remaining 15 seats. International monitors deemed the 2013 elections free and fair. The free vote and peaceful transfer of power were seen as signs of a healthy democratic system.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 10 / 16

Political parties, previously illegal, were allowed to begin registering in 2007. Bhutan now has two officially registered major parties and at least three smaller ones. One of the smaller parties—the Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party (BKP)—was disqualified from participating in the last elections due to its inability to field candidates in all constituencies. Citizens must receive government approval to form political parties and hold political rallies, which significantly hinders the development of parties.

Bhutan still relies on India for defense and many foreign policy matters.

Bhutan's electoral rules stipulate that political parties must not be limited to members of any regional, ethnic, or religious group. No party exists to represent Nepali speakers. International monitors have noted that Nepali speakers have been turned away from voting.

C. Functioning of Government: 10 / 12 (+1)

Bhutan has made a rapid transition from a system in which the monarch and his advisers had enormous influence over the Parliament to one in which the Parliament determines its own policies. Although the king retains some powers, the party in control of Parliament selects its own cabinet. The cabinet has increasingly taken on governance without deferring to the monarch for guidance, and Prime Minister Tobgay has shown more signs of independence than his predecessor.

Although corruption exists in Bhutan, the country has in recent years made significant strides in addressing the issue. The 2006 Anti-Corruption Act established whistleblower protections, and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), whose role was strengthened and expanded in 2011, is tasked with investigating and preventing graft. The new administration has repeatedly backed up the ACC's efforts to suspend and investigate officials suspected of graft—including government economic planners and officials involved in imports, who were the focus of several ACC probes in 2014. Courts have in recent years won cases against some of the most powerful political elites in the country, setting examples for lower-ranking officials. In 2014, the ACC and the attorney general's office began investigating the sitting foreign minister on allegations of graft in the building of a monastery. Bhutan was ranked 30 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Prime Minister Tobgay has welcomed a loyal opposition in parliament, and has tried to make the office of the prime minister more open to the public through strategies such as media appearances and the use of social media. He has also strengthened transparency by making the salaries of public officials public and using the power of his office to make the central and local budgets more open to review.

In February 2014, Bhutan passed a landmark right to information law that will guarantee greater government transparency and put the onus on government officials and agencies to release information about every major decision. It is one of the most sweeping such laws in any developing nation, and was preceded by two years of significant and open debate.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -1 / 0

The Bhutanese government has for decades attempted to diminish and repress the rights of ethnic Nepalis, and to force many of them to leave the country, thereby changing the ethnic makeup of the country.

The government expelled a large percentage of Nepali speakers in the early 1990s, after previously stripping them of their citizenship. Many fled to Nepal as refugees. The government maintains that many Nepali speakers left Bhutan voluntarily or had been illegal immigrants, but in 1992, more than 100,000 such refugees living in extremely poor conditions in Nepal were denied reentry to Bhutan, and the Bhutanese government has consistently refused to repatriate them. A resettlement effort aimed at transferring the refugees to third countries began in 2007. According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2014, roughly 90,000 refugees had been resettled in third countries, mostly in the United States and Canada. About 27,000 refugees from Bhutan remain in Nepal's camps.

Civil Liberties: 27 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 9 / 16

The law protects freedoms of speech and of the press. However, defamation can carry criminal penalties. In June, before a visit by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, government officials instructed journalists not to publish stories critical of Bhutan's leadership during Modi's trip. Journalists often self-censor in their coverage of the Nepali minority and of some aspects of Bhutan's foreign relations.

A 2006 media law liberalized the media landscape, leading to the establishment of independent outlets. However, independent media outlets depend heavily on government advertising, and many newspapers struggle financially. An August 2014 report by the Bhutan journalists' association argued that freedom of the press was weak in Bhutan in part due to indirect government control through advertising. About 30 percent of Bhutan's population has internet access, a figure that grows significantly every year. Social media continued to gain popularity in 2014 among young, urban Bhutanese.

The constitution protects freedom of religion, but local authorities often harass non-Buddhists. While Bhutanese of all faiths can worship relatively freely in private, the Drukpa Kagyupa school of Mahayana Buddhism is the official religion and reportedly receives various state subsidies. The Christian minority has allegedly been subject to harassment by the authorities in the past, and permits for the construction of Hindu temples are reportedly difficult to obtain. In March 2014, police in southern Bhutan arrested several pastors for holding a Christian worship service without gaining permission from local authorities; they were held for more than a month without charges.

Few restrictions on academic freedom have been reported, though nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claim that the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit is banned.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, but the government must approve the purpose of protests and often does not.

NGOs that work on issues related to ethnic Nepalis are not allowed to operate, but other local and international NGOs work increasingly freely. Under the 2007 Civil Society Organization Act, all new NGOs must register with the government. The constitution protects the right of workers to form associations, but not for the purpose of conducting strikes. Most of the country's workforce is engaged in subsistence agriculture and is therefore not unionized.

F. Rule of Law: 6 / 16

Since 2007, Bhutan has moved decisively toward judicial-based rule of law, and its judiciary is now considered generally independent. An independent Judicial Service Council, created in 2007, controls judicial appointments and promotions. The Supreme Court serves as the final arbiter of appeals.

The civilian police force generally operates within the law. Prisons in Bhutan for the most part meet international standards. There are dozens of political prisoners being held in the country, according to NGOs. Since 2010, the authorities have released at least 11 political prisoners. Most are jailed for being

part of banned political groups or parties, such as the local communist party or parties that advocated for rights for ethnic Nepalis; in some cases, the charges are allegedly fabricated to justify arrest of government critics, particularly around the Nepali issue.

The constitution protects against discrimination based on sex, race, disability, language, religion, or societal status. While these provisions are generally respected, Nepali-speaking citizens reportedly face employment discrimination. Despite legal protections, people with disabilities continue to face societal discrimination, particularly in rural areas. There are no legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation, and no NGO in the country explicitly works on the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16

Laws provide for freedom for Bhutanese citizens to travel domestically and internationally, but no laws protect against forced exile. Bhutanese security forces sometimes arrest Nepalis seeking to enter the country. Those lacking a security clearance certificate are subject to restrictions on freedom of movement and face difficulties in starting a business, but the government has in recent years simplified the process for obtaining a certificate.

Since 2013, Bhutanese are no longer been required to wear traditional dress. Women participate freely in social and economic life but continue to be underrepresented in government and politics. The law protects against domestic violence, with the possibility of prison sentences ranging from one month to three years. Rape, including spousal rape, is also illegal. However, societal taboos lead many incidences of rape and domestic violence to go unreported.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)